

The Art of Root

Jim Benedict – Union Bridge Church of the Brethren
Sermon for Sunday, May 24, 2009 Psalm 1

Roots.

The first image that comes to mind for many when they hear that word is tangled tendrils underground, anchoring a tree or bush. Roots draw nourishment and water from the soil for the plant above. Roots, we tend to think, are important but not special, and not especially attractive. It's okay that they are underground, out of sight.

But there is more to roots than that. Much of the world's population enjoys edible roots. Maybe our first response when we think of roots should be, "Yum!" Think beets, carrots, radishes, casava or sweet potato. Some people even see beauty in roots. Take, for example, Fang Peichun. Fang is an artist who specializes in the ancient Chinese art of root carving. As a root-carver, he coaxes art from a part of the natural world that everyone else ignores. Out there in the forest, Fang sees hidden beauty where others see dirt. "The period of searching for tree roots is the most exciting part for me," says the energetic old man. "Sometimes I even dream of finding some tree roots in strange shapes." Root carving, you see, is a cooperative effort — a combination of "man's work and God's work," according to Fang. The original shape of the root inspires the artist to imagine how it might be carved. No two roots are alike; thus every discovery of a new root yields new possibilities and different pictures to imagine.

The Psalmist who composed Psalm 1 was no root carver, but was – like Fang – a big fan of roots. Psalm 1 is a reminder to us that often it is the things beneath the surface, the hidden yet practical things that are most important. While fruit trees yield a harvest of food, maples and oaks provide autumn glory, and evergreens yield a harvest of wood for building, none of them can do so without the foundational and functional support of a good root system. It's the beauty of rooted-ness that makes it all possible.

While trees live or die depending upon their roots, it's clear that we, too, live and die according to how rooted we are in the things that matter. Being rooted spiritually is a thing of beauty, and a necessity. The psalmist encourages us to go deep, to sink proper spiritual roots in the law of God because the growth and fruitfulness of the whole tree, the whole community, is the inevitable result.

This emphasis on roots and hidden resources is definitely counter-cultural. Our culture celebrates what is on the surface, the

image, what people see. That is why tens of billions of dollars worth of cosmetics – creams, lotions, powders, perfumes, lipsticks, fingernail and toe nail polish, eye and facial makeup, permanent waves, colored contact lenses, hair colors, hair sprays and gels, deodorants, baby products, bath oils, bubble baths, bath salts – are sold every year. Add in fashion, exercise equipment, diet supplements, and other products designed to make us look good, and an enormous proportion of the gross domestic product in developed countries goes toward presenting a pleasing appearance.

Part of the problem, I suppose, is that we are all in such a hurry. We don't have time for much more than first impressions – snap judgements based on what's on the surface. Of course, that is why we are so often fooled, and why con artists can make such a good living in our country. It takes time to look below the surface. It takes effort to investigate beyond what is apparent.

But, the psalmist is telling us, it is that which is below the surface and less apparent that matters most. It isn't shiny leaves and long branches, it isn't smooth bark and rapid growth that prove or provide health. It is roots – strong, long, deep, ample roots.

The roots that the psalmist encourages the community to grow are sunk into the “law of the Lord.” Those who “delight in the law of the Lord” and “meditate” on it “day and night” enjoy the same prosperity and health as a tree that is “planted by streams of water.” Now, this business of meditating on the law can sound like the description of a Bible-nerd, or worse, some legalistic, judgmental character always ready to take others to task for their violations of God's law. But for the psalm's author, the law wasn't simply a set of rules. The law was God's way of revealing what matters and what life is all about. Meditating on the law was the way to “get” God, so to speak, -- to understand who God is and what God is up to in the world.

Meditating on the law is more than memorizing it. It is engaging it at a deeper level, mulling it over, figuring out what it meant when it was first given and making the right connections so you can apply it to the present. We have a wonderful example of what it means to “meditate on the law” in Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus doesn't just repeat the Old Testament law from memory; he comments on it. He says, “This is what it means now. Here are some ways it has been applied incorrectly, and here are some ways to apply it in the right way.” The Bible is not just a handbook full of simple answers to all our questions. It is a deep well of wisdom, from which we can draw. Putting down roots into the law of God – into the scriptures generally – gives

us resources to draw on for all kinds of circumstances. The better we know the scriptures, the better we are able to find and understand the resources when we need them.

Christian author Warren Wiersbe reminds us, “All of nature depends on hidden resources. The great trees send their roots down into the earth to draw up water and minerals. Rivers have their sources in the snow-capped mountains. The most important part of a tree is the part you cannot see, the root system, and the most important part of the Christian’s life is the part that only God sees. Unless we draw upon the deep resources of God by faith, we will fail against the pressures of life.” It is worth noting that Psalms was the song book of the ancient Israelites, and thus the part of the scriptures which the largely illiterate population of God’s people knew best. And this psalm, Psalm 1, was chosen to come first in the collection. It sets the tone for what follows.

What follows is another 149 psalms. Some are long, other short. Some celebrate and praise. Others complain and criticize. Some lament and some are shockingly harsh in tone. The psalms allow the people of God to express just about every emotion that we can imagine, and touch on the whole breadth of human experience, from triumph to tragedy, from confusion to clarity, from glory to guilt.

But Psalm 1 comes first, and talks about roots – about putting down deep roots into the law of the Lord. And it talks about how having roots sunk deep in God will help us all get through any and every experience life can throw our way – triumph or tragedy, confusion or clarity, glory or guilt.

This past Monday in the mail I received something I had ordered last winter for delivery at just the right time. The box had a couple of small holes in it and simple words in red marker: “Live Plants.” But one look inside made it seem as if those words were misleading. What I found was a small bunch of stems kept together by a rubber band and topped by shriveled leaves. It looked like a child’s bouquet of violets left out too long in the sun – lifeless.

But along the stems were just a few fine roots. And from past experience I knew that all it would take to bring those shriveled stems and withered leaves back to life was to get those roots in water. Sure enough, it worked.

If we have roots, we can survive a lot. If our roots go down deep into God’s word and will, we can withstand floods and droughts, winter and

wind. If our roots are working, we can tap into amazing hidden resources that make us remarkably resilient.

And healthy roots come from simple, steady faith practices. When we study Scripture, meditate on it, obey God's commandments even when no one is looking, when we practice daily spiritual disciplines, when we worship together Sunday after Sunday, our "roots" grow strong.

Summer is just around the corner and everything seems to be green and growing. Flowers are blooming, trees are lush with leaves. That's what we see when we look around. But let's not forget what we don't see, what's going on beneath the surface. What matters most is the growth and health of the roots.

Spend some of your time this summer focusing on your "roots," – on your connection to God, your faith practices. Then, when winter comes, literally or figuratively, you will find yourself prepared.

Amen.